

Critical Media Literacy in our Middle Schools

—Elizabeth Smith

Do you laugh, grimace, or cry when you think of your middle school years? Mood swings, raging hormones, acne, and clumsy bodies are just a few of the horrors visited on our children as they enter puberty. Mother Nature has played a nasty trick on adolescents. Just when they begin harboring thoughts of being attractive and sexually alluring, they seem to catch some sort of strange plague. To add insult to injury, at the precise moment when youth are in the troughs of this body image crisis, they are bombarded with media images featuring males and females with perfect bodies, silky, shiny hair, clear skin, and straight, white teeth—not exactly what most teens see when they look in the mirror.

McCarthy (2000) reports that eating disorders and low self esteem often accompany adolescence when youth feel they do not measure up to the torrent of images presented to them on television, in films, and in fashion magazines. The media send powerful messages suggesting that girls should look like Barbie dolls and that boys should have “six-pack abs.”

A study by Thoman (1999) finds that teen drinking, smoking, and sexual promiscuity are some of the serious negative behaviors that have prompted teachers and families to examine more closely the role that media messages play in shaping the cultural environment in which our children grow up (p. 54). She goes on to say that the idea of turning off the television set is not enough to combat the influence of media. We should have the ability to make informed choices about our viewing. We should be able to challenge and question the media and be more conscious about what is going on around us. We need to raise the right questions about what we are watching, reading, and listening to (p.51). Bringing media literacy into the curriculum is one way to help students develop these abilities.

By the time children reach middle school, they already have a well-established relationship with the media. Ignoring the significance of media in the lives of adolescents creates a gap between their in-school and out-of-school worlds. According to Beane (2003), middle school curricula needs to be relevant to students. Therefore, educators should make time to address the forceful array of commercial interests that are aimed at early adolescents, including those that aim to influence their tastes in fashion, music, leisure activities, and entertainment (p.56).

Goodman (2003) agrees and recommends bringing media into the classroom rather than excluding it. He advocates the power of video production to connect school to the important issues in the lives of the inner-city students with whom he works. By creating video documentaries, Goodman’s students learn to produce, analyze, and evaluate media. Through learning these skills, his students develop a critical lens through which to view the world they live in. Alvermann, Moon, and Hagood (1999) take a similar approach. They advocate what they call a self-reflexive approach to teaching critical media literacy—one that acknowledges the pleasures of the media, yet enables critical analytical skills to be developed and practiced.

The media play an important part in all of our lives. Many of us would be very unhappy if we lost the use of our cell phones, computers, laptops, Internet access, television sets, or DVD players. As with many technologies, media is neither inherently good nor bad. In some uses, especially when we use it uncritically, it can be a detrimental influence; but if we use it consciously as a tool, it can be empowering. Our media rich society gives us plenty of opportunities to teach about the media in ways that are empowering. And that is what I do. For the past eight years, I have been teaching critical media literacy to middle school students at Le Jardin Academy on the Windward side of Oahu.

Allow me to share the primary components of my media literacy curriculum.

The first project I have my middle school student do consists of a student-produced music video. This process enables students to gain insight into the production process and all that goes on behind the scenes in music video production. Student interest runs high as they create storyboards, write scripts, and tape their video footage. Next comes the editing stage. This is an important step that engages the students in problem solving and decision making as they give expression to their artistic vision and consider how their audience will react to it. As the students work towards producing a coherent and smooth-flowing final product, they realize the importance of careful planning. Nothing can be left to chance. Once the students have gone through the production process themselves, they are better prepared to look critically at media produced for them. They understand what

is involved and know what to look for. They are clued into some of the strategies that professional visual media producers employ to achieve their effects with audiences.

After viewing and critiquing the music video, we move to the next topic—how the media influence our lives. One of the films I show the students is a video documentary of a young girl who is intensely involved in a children's beauty pageant. The video vividly portrays the ways in which the media shapes the child's preoccupation with her physical appearance and her idea of physical beauty. Because the documentary focuses on younger children, my students are able to distance themselves somewhat from issues related to their own experiences with the media, and this is a good way to begin. They are more open to analysis and critique when they see the victims as more vulnerable than themselves. As a follow-up to this video, the students begin to examine their own relationship with the media. How much TV do they watch? What types of shows do they tend to view? Do they play video games? What kind and how often? Students are invariably surprised when they realize how many hours of their day they devote to watching television, viewing DVDs, listening to music, and playing computer games, in comparison to other activities. A discussion about healthy choices and a balanced life style generally follows.

After discussing their level of involvement with the media, students begin to take a closer look at the medium that takes up a large portion of their leisure time—television. It is usually an eye-opener to students when they discover the amount of programming time taken up by commercials. They are also surprised to learn how the mass media are driven by the profit motive. The students become interested in learning about and being able to identify the tactics and strategies used by advertisers, such as appeals to youth, beauty, sexual attraction, social status, and being "cool." Students also learn that not everyone is influenced to the same extent by the same advertisements. Individuals construct meaning differently. What is "cool" to one student may be "dorky" to another. Advertisers adapt to differences in audience by dipping into a big bag of tricks filled with strategies designed to appeal to a range of viewers. The students begin to identify the "hooks" that advertisers use to attract different people to their products. In addition, students take a close look at other aspects of television commercials—music,

lighting, pacing, quick cuts, and special effects—and learn to identify ways in which interest and attention are created. The students delight in detecting subliminal messages in advertisements as well. Target audiences are also described, along with the types of products advertisers connect with different groups of people. The students then list the products that are advertised during the shows that they watch and consider this information in relation to their own consumer buying behaviors. Students often find that they do buy the products they have seen advertised, and admit that they may be more influenced by the commercials than they had realized.

In their culminating project students completely deconstruct a commercial on their own by using all the knowledge of advertisers tricks that they have learned and talked about. The most common feedback I receive from my students at the end of the class is that they will never look at commercials the same way again. I am delighted with this response. My goal is to help them "pull back the curtain" on the media and pay attention to what goes on behind the screen. As Thoman puts it, "We must turn the closed, one-way system of commercial mass media into a two-way process of discussion, reflection, and action" (p.54).

As a teacher, I feel passionate about the responsibility parents and educators have in helping students to be active rather than passive users of the media. Children are enormously influenced by the media, even before they start school, and it will always play a role in their lives. As educators, it is up to us to help empower our students with the skills of discrimination required to analyze and critically assess the media. Such knowledge is fundamental to their ability to make safe and healthy choices in their lives.

References

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